

*Washington, DC* - One day after the U.S. Department of the Interior conducted a record-setting lease sale of 30 million acres of public waters in Alaska for oil and gas development, Congressman Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) today pressed Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne over why the Bush administration continues to lease public lands when there is a huge backlog of land already leased that has not been developed. Kempthorne testified this morning before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, of which Hinchey is a member.

"With less than a year left in office, the Bush administration is frantically rushing to lease off as many acres of public land and waters as it possibly can to its friends in the oil and gas industry in order to help them maximize their profits at the expense of the American people," Hinchey said. "There is a huge backlog of U.S. land that's already been leased to the oil and gas industry, which hasn't been developed yet because energy companies haven't had time to start drilling yet. Why not hold off on leasing any new land until there is a real need? In the meantime, we can finally begin to aggressively invest in alternative energy such as solar so that we can avoid ever having to lease this public land and water. It's time for the United States to turn the page and aggressively move forward with the inevitable shift from oil toward renewable energy. This country and this planet will not survive if we continue our dependence on oil."

The U.S. Department of the Interior's Minerals Management Service (MMS) yesterday held its first lease sale in Alaska's Chukchi Sea since 1991. MMS received a record-setting 667 bids on 488 blocks yesterday. The federal government has already leased 35 million acres of public land to oil and gas companies, but only 11 million of those acres have already undergone development. Hinchey pressed Kempthorne on why the administration was racing to lease off more public property at a time when there is an enormous surplus of leased land that has not even been touched yet by oil and gas companies. Kempthorne failed to answer Hinchey's question directly and attempted to draw attention away from the matter.

"While I disagree with the need to lease any additional public land for oil and gas development in the first place, it makes no sense for the Interior Department to lease this public property now when it could do so years down the line when oil will inevitably cost even more and net taxpayers a bigger profit," Hinchey said. "It does make a little more sense when you realize that the Interior Department is acting on behalf of President Bush to lease public property at cheaper prices to his friends in the energy industry. The oil and gas industry recognizes full well that it may never see such an oil friendly president ever again after this year."

Hinchey also questioned Kempthorne over the Interior Department's lack of auditors, who monitor the amount of oil and gas taken from public land so that the federal government can receive royalty payments for the drilled product. The Bush administration has proposed adding four new, full-time auditors in 2009, but Hinchey argued that such an increase falls far short of replacing the 35 auditors who have been cut since President Bush took office. Kempthorne

again danced around the issue and didn't answer Hinchey's question.

Beyond the energy policy implications of the latest lease sale in Alaska, the move came apparently just days before the Fish and Wildlife Service is about to make a determination on whether to classify polar bears as threatened. Hinchey and his colleagues in Congress have weighed in numerous times with the Interior Department, asking it to postpone this lease sale until a determination was made on whether to list the polar bear as threatened and protect its habitat if it were listed. The polar bear population is swiftly declining due to global warming. Interior scientists, who were rebuffed by MMS officials, warned that the bears would be put in further jeopardy if drilling were allowed because their habitat would be compromised and the bears would be subject to oil spills, which MMS has admitted are quite likely.